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C O N F I D E N T I A L BRUSSELS 001620

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/25/2015

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [EUN](#) [USEU](#) [BRUSSELS](#)

SUBJECT: THE EU "GYMNICH" MEETINGS - HOW THEY OPERATE

REF: SECTO 007

Classified By: Kyle Scott, PolMinCouns, Reason 1.4 (D)

- [1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Informal transatlantic "Gymnich" style meetings could provide a useful forum for informal exchanges that might help bridge the current impasse in NATO/EU relations. END SUMMARY
- [1](#)2. (C) In recent months, several proposals have been floated for more informal meetings between foreign policy chiefs in Europe with their U.S. counterpart. Belgian PM Verhofstadt has suggested an EU/US "Transatlantic Gymnich" meeting, and NATO SYG De Hoop Scheffer (ref) has also suggested a combined EU/NATO foreign ministers meeting. With that in mind, we offer the following background on what "Gymnichs" are and how they work.
- [1](#)3. (U) "Gymnich" refers to an informal gathering of all 25 EU Foreign Ministers, together with the CFSP High Rep (Solana) and the External Relations Commissioner. Named after the German castle near Bonn where the practice was established in 1974, these meetings are held once during each six-month EU Presidency, usually on a weekend or on Friday-Saturday, at a resort in the Presidency country (most recently on April 15-16 at Senningen Chateau in Luxembourg). The venue often has a special meaning for the hosting FM, e.g. a historic site in his/her constituency that he/she will enjoy presenting to colleagues, though security inevitably plays a role in choosing a site. There is traditionally a social program, to which the ministers' spouses are invited.
- [1](#)4. (U) EU FMs already meet together some fifteen times a year, at monthly GAERC sessions (except in August) and as part of the delegations for the quarterly EU summits. But these meetings have formal agendas related to the important role they play in the EU's legal and decision-making structures. "Gymnichs," by contrast, are supposed to have an informal character that prevents the adoption of any EU legislation or policies and encourages freer, more forward-looking discussions than at their GAERC gatherings in EU buildings in Brussels. Delegations are supposed to be small, just minister plus three or four, since the lack of formal decisions means less staff support is needed, in theory. The preparations also differ: the Council's working groups in Brussels are not involved as the basic purpose of a "Gymnich" removes the need for exchanging signals or forging compromises ahead of the meeting. A "Gymnich" therefore has no formal agenda. The hosting FM proposes agenda issues, shared with capitals in an invitation letter, and usually meant to be oriented toward the medium or long-term. But topical issues, major foreign policy developments or crises will inevitably be addressed.
- [1](#)5. (SBU) The success of Gymnichs in encouraging informal or freewheeling debate among EUFMs is mixed at best. In our view, Gymnichs most resemble GAERCs without the Conclusions and the neckties. The EU's increased membership, the inevitably growing delegations, the needs of the media for a press center and press conferences, and the ever-stricter security requirements all conspire to turn these informal sessions into carefully scripted events. In the last several years, perhaps only the Greek Gymnich on the remote island of Kastellorizo in March 2002 can be argued to have made any significant contribution in terms of "new thinking" in EU foreign policy, having served as the launching pad for what eventually became the European Security Strategy in December 2002. Greek FM Papandreou tried at the same meeting to promote a freewheeling discussion on US-EU relations by soliciting thirty-odd papers on the topic from independent experts and commentators. This proved too much for the assembled FMs to digest.
- [1](#)6. (C) COMMENT: For EUFMs, who already meet so frequently in formal sessions, it is the informal nature of Gymnichs that is supposed to make them stand out. For the U.S., a "transatlantic Gymnich" would provide a different dynamic from the regular, semi-annual US-EU ministerials, in that the latter sessions are in US plus EU Troika (Presidency FM, Solana, and RELEX Commissioner) format. A Transatlantic Gymnich (or a NATO-EU "Gymnich") would be for the U.S. plus EU at 25. The challenge in such a large forum would be maintaining informality and coherence, while resisting the temptation to over-schedule the event. To the extent such meetings could help bridge the current impasse in NATO/EU relations, Mission believes they could be useful.

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